Javed Abidi (left) and Stephen Hawking were among the first people in wheelchairs to view New Delhi's Jantar Mantar monument up close, thanks to ramps installed in 2001.

Courtesy *Outlook*

Redefining What's Possible

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

A blind American woman and her dog, a wheelchair-using Indian journalist, a handicapped British physicist show how the physically challenged can contribute to, and enjoy, our world.

When British physicist Stephen Hawking was coming to India in 2001, he was told it was impossible to accommodate his wheelchair at historic monuments in New Delhi such as the Red Fort, Qutub Minar and Jantar Mantar. Yet before he left, ramps were installed to allow him, and many Indians in wheelchairs, to see the sites up close. Now, wheelchair users have access to India's most famous architectural wonders.

When Javed Abidi started his journalism career, he was told the best he could hope for would be editing behind a desk. Yet the wheelchair-using reporter traveled across the country, interviewed celebrities and politicians and covered events just like other journalists.

When Joyce Kane, an American blind woman, wanted to come to India, to experience the culture and people, visit her relatives and share her experience of how the blind can expand their independence, her mother told her it was impossible. Yet, traveling with her Seeing Eye dog, Corey, Kane completed a one-month tour of India. She touched Mohandas K. Gandhi's spinning wheel in Ahmedabad. She took a dance lesson, using the "touch learning" method, at the Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind in Bangalore. Her fingers examined Christmas decorations made by students at the National Association for the Blind in Mumbai.

Kane said she experienced India by "hearing it through my ears, smelling it through my nose." Her tour was a media sensation. She traveled on Indian Airlines with her guide dog sitting quietly at her feet, though one security guard demanded to see Corey's non-existent boarding pass. She stayed in hotels and ate in restaurants with Corey at her side. Overflow crowds packed auditoriums to hear about the rights of the handicapped under U.S. law, the education, training and equipment provided by the state and national governments that allowed Kane to remain a productive citizen after she woke up blind from heart surgery eight years ago. Her diabetes had caused small artery disease, which left her optic blood vessels without enough oxygen during the operation, something her doctors could not have known.


ANNE GRIMES

Joyce Kane's Seeing Eye dog, Corey, showed patience as students at the Helen Keller Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Mumbai stroked her fur.

"The greatest thing I lost was not my sight, but my independence," Kane says. "Through Corey, and the rights I have under the Americans with Disabilities Act, I've been able to get pieces of that back. The goal in the U.S. is to get you employed, to be a taxpayer, able to help everybody else." The law "gave me the right to education. After I went blind I went back to college. I received training so that I could do the work I had done before, as a medical transcriber for doctors, if I had so chosen. The act gave me the right to travel where I would like to with my guide dog. It makes buildings accessible to the disabled, requires Braille signs in public places."

It wasn't always that way. Disabled people in the United States together pushed for the laws that allowed them to work and live in society, rather than remaining trapped at home, dependent on others, seen as objects of charity rather than contributors. For instance, wherever Kane went in India, she was told that Seeing Eye dogs would never work here because the streets are too chaotic, with potholes, wild animals and reckless drivers. At one time "we had similar conditions in the United States," Kane answered. "But leash laws were put into place to control roving dogs and the streets were made safer, not just for the blind, but for all people."

Her comments inspired many of her listeners to consider new possibilities. "She kept talking about the rights of blind people, that we could be advocates for ourselves," says Asha Bhende, a partially sighted retired science professor who heard Kane at the American Center in Mumbai. "We're always being told what we can't do. And a blind person feels this way himself or herself. It's a matter of having role models and building up confidence. I keep telling myself I *can* do it."

Hawking—a world famous physicist despite the motor neuron disease that inhibits his ability to walk, move or speak—is a role model for many disabled, especially those in wheelchairs, says Abidi, who after his journalism career founded the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, based in New Delhi. When Hawking was coming to India, Abidi contacted the scientist's staff and asked him to give a talk on rights of the disabled.

Instead, it was suggested that Abidi arrange a tour for Hawking of New Delhi's famous sites. It quickly became apparent that none were wheelchair accessible, despite the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1996 that mandates non-discrimination in access to public buildings and transportation. "The media then took up the story and because it was a matter of national image…on Sunday morning, there were wooden ramps," says Abidi, who later won a court case to make them permanent.

Subsequently, $20,000 in grants from the U.S. Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund and the U.S. Embassy Public Affairs Section helped Abidi's group conduct awareness workshops with government officials, historical preservationists and tourism industry representatives to make monuments accessible without harming them. The funds also paid for an exchange of U.S. and Indian experts and led to the Taj Mahal, Khajuraho, the

Joyce Kane, visiting a blind school in Mumbai, says she spends more time with her Seeing Eye dog, Corey, than with her husband. She says Corey has given back some of the independence she lost when she became blind eight years ago.

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City Palace in Jaipur and the main Sarnath temple being made wheelchair accessible. The Archaeological Survey of India has since adopted a policy to make all World Heritage and national historical sites accessible to the handicapped.

Abidi is dissatisfied, however, with progress on implementing other parts of India's law on disabled rights, which also calls for steps to be taken to ensure a barrier-free environment in workplaces and schools, and requires 3 percent of lower level government jobs to be reserved for the disabled. "This is not a wish list. It's an act of Parliament, yet it is treated as if it's just a policy paper," Abidi says. It took a 1997 public interest lawsuit before wheelchairs that could fit into airplane aisles, and a lift to get them up to the airline doors, were made available at New Delhi's airport. "In other places, I must endure four completely untrained people physically carrying me up the stairs to the aircraft like I'm a sack of potatoes. It's scary," says Abidi, who was only able to attend university because classmates kept carrying him up staircases so he could reach the lecture rooms.

"I'm not asking for miracles overnight," he says. "But when renovation is taking place and they are putting in fancy new machines, why can't they plan a ramp?" Most New Delhi metro stations have no lifts for wheelchairs, he says, and new toilets all over the city have doors that are too narrow. "India has 70 million disabled, plus visitors," Abidi says. "Imagine the embarrassment they have to go through."

"Resistance can be overcome, given the will and the support," says Dr. Rajendra Vyas, the honorary secretary-general of the National Association for the Blind in Mumbai. "What we need here are funds for medical care to cure and prevent blindness, such as from cataracts and avoidable diseases; education of blind children so that they have opportunities rather than their families keeping them at home, and employment is the biggest thing."

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Seventy percent of the blind in the United States are employed, Dr. Vyas notes, even though there are no reserved jobs, just legally guaranteed equal opportunity. "The U.S. encourages and facilitates this can-do spirit among its disabled citizens," he adds. "In India we're still talking about how to get more jobs for the blind. Education and training are the key, and we're still at the stage of putting Braille signs in buildings." In both countries there is a shortage of teachers of the blind. But the scale of the task is quite different: There are 14.5 million blind in India, and 1.3 million in the United States. Dr. Vyas notes that the choices for allocation of funds are also different. For the $30,000 the Seeing Eye organization spent to train Corey for 10 years of useful work, a human helper could be employed in India for the same amount of time.

Still, Corey's quiet presence and demonstrated ability to guide Kane through India raised new possibilities. Many blind children, and adults, who had never touched a dog before stroked her fur. Medical students and doctors heard from Kane about other ways to make the blind independent, such as talking medicine bottles or insulin injectors that make clicking noises so a blind diabetic can mix and count her own doses. One of Kane's jobs in the United States is to work with the National Foundation of the Blind in testing new inventions such as more advanced talking computers or scanners that could photograph objects on store shelves and describe them audibly.

One project, still at the experimental stage, is the dream of Dr. Marc Mauer, the foundation's president, says Kane. It is aimed at allowing a blind person to drive a car. "I hope in my lifetime, they'll be able to do that," says Kane. "With determination, you can go as far as your hopes and dreams allow you." ☐